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ABSTRACT

In 1989, Boysville of Michigan received funding to design and implement a family reunification program that could be disseminated statewide and nationally for replication. The site for the pilot project was Detroit (Michigan) and surrounding communities, an economically depressed, urban area. The Homebuilders Model, which emphasizes children's rights to their family, child safety, families' ability to change, family strengths, and flexible, time-limited services, was utilized. Families with children just coming into the foster care system were the target population. The Boysville Program provided 3 to 5 weeks of intensive services (5-20 hours per week) before children returned home and 5 weeks of intensive services after they returned home. Homebuilders' interventions consisted of cognitive and behavioral approaches, both hard and soft services, and behaviorally specific goals. The caseload size was two families for each caseworker. The caseworkers found that the problems confronting troubled families were more extreme versions of similar problems confronting any family and that parents were highly motivated to get their children back. During the project, 50 families were referred to the program; 40 (80%) completed the program; and 32 were reunited with their children. Problems encountered included difficulties in convincing social service workers and juvenile court judges about the mission and goals of family reunification. Progress in accomplishing each of the project's goals is assessed. (AC)

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ED 369 489

Boysville of Michigan Family Reunification Project

Abstract

The Boysville of Michigan Family Reunification project, funded by the Administration on Children, Youth and Families of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, addressed the quality of reunification services by developing a replicable model program for dissemination to State agencies. The final report presents an overview of the project and describes project outcomes, including the successful adaptation of the Homebuilders reunification model, which resulted in an increased number of successful reunifications among the study group, and the statewide implementation of the program in January 1991.

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Boysville of Michigan
Family Reunification Project
Final Report
May 17, 1989 - June 30, 1991

Introduction

In 1989 Boysville was a recipient of the Department of Health and Human Services grant award #90c20957/01. Boysville proposed to improve the quality and availability of reunification services by designing and implementing a family reunification program which would be disseminated at a state and national level for replication. This reunification program would be modeled after Homebuilders, a prevention program that has received national recognition for its effectiveness. The site for this demonstration project will be Wayne County, Michigan, an economically depressed urban area composed of Detroit and surrounding communities. The target population will be families from Wayne County with one or more children in substitute care.

The objectives for the project were:

(1) to adapt Homebuilders for reunification services

(2) to disseminate, on a local, regional and national level information regarding the project;

(3) to provide technical assistance to replicate a like or similar model;

(4) to increase family functioning;

(5) to decrease the length of stay in foster care and prevent re-entry into substitute care;

(6) to provide an alternative cost effective program for foster care in Wayne County.

The products from this project were: quarterly and final evaluation reports, and follow-up evaluations at 3, 6 and 12 months periods, a cost effective reunification program for replication and a program manual for distribution.

Program Planning

In planning this program, Boysville sought the collaborative efforts of the Wayne County Department of Social Services and the Wayne County Juvenile Court, two key influential establishments in family reunification. Programmatic development was done by an eight member joint committee called the Family Reunification Project Committee, with representatives from Boysville, Wayne County Department of Social Services and Wayne County Juvenile Court. On March 7, 1989 the Committee met to develop a Family Reunification adaptation of Homebuilders. Key issues were to design a reunification program which would provide the best possible services to clients, while maintaining the integrity of the Homebuilders model as well as obtaining an organizational fit with Boysville the provider and with Wayne County Department of Social Services and Wayne County Juvenile Court. The committee work focused on the following:

1. Defining the target population
2. Adapting the deliver model from prevention to reunification
3. Implementing the reunification model
4. Training the Wayne County Department of Social Services Foster Care staff, who were the primary referral source
5. Strengthening the communications between Boysville staff and the Wayne County Juvenile Court staff regarding the use of this program as an alternative
6. Designing a program evaluation model to serve the unique aspects of this program

The committee was familiar with Homebuilders, as the State of Michigan, Family Preservation Division had implemented the Homebuilders in October 1988. The State was in fact responding to the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, also

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known as PL96-272. This Act was a bold attempt by Congress to shift toward preventive and family reunification services. The law required that states make "reasonable efforts" to prevent unnecessary placement of children outside their homes, to reunite children with their biological families, and to find permanent adoptive homes for children who cannot return home.

Michigan established Families First Programs in eighteen counties, using the Homebuilders Model as a prevention program. Boysville was among the forerunner in establishing one of the first Families First in 1988 in Saginaw County with state funds, and another Families First in 1989, in Wayne County with the Skillman Foundation funds and Family Reunification in 1989 with federal funds.

The Homebuilders Model was adapted for reunification for the Boysville Project. Families with children just coming into the foster care system were selected as the target population. Referrals to the program came from DSS Foster Care Workers. Eligible clients for the program were families with one or more children who have recently entered the foster care system, generally in care less than 60 days and with adjudication and/or dispositional hearing pending. This was a period of time where it was believed that the biological family was still very much eager to have the child return home and therefore receptive to treatment. The duration of the program was eight weeks. The Boysville Reunification Program provided three to five weeks of intensive services (5-20 hours per week) before children return home and three to five weeks of intensive services after children return home, but totaling no more than eight weeks of combined

pre and post return services. The Homebuilders interventions consisted of cognitive and behavioral approaches, a mixture of soft and hard services, and behaviorally specific goals. The caseload size was two families for each worker.

Myths and Facts About Families

From the families referred and serviced, certain myths were dispelled:

1. **Parents whose children are removed from home do not want their children or cannot or will not change their behavior.**

Our workers found that the problems confronting troubled families were more extreme versions of similar problems confronting any family. Contrary to the myth, parents were very remorseful for losing their children and therefore highly motivated to get them back. With the Homebuilders approach and reunification services, these families showed great strength and resiliency to improve their lives, in order to reunite with their children.

2. **Foster care is in the best interest of children who have known the hurt of abuse and neglect.**

Workers in our pilot study found that 31% of the children that were placed in foster care were abused. Sixty-six percent were environmentally neglected and therefore placed in foster care. The devastation for foster children was being torn away from their family, multiple moves, extended stays and no stable permanent family ties. Removing a child from a troubled family is not necessarily the best solution.

3. Foster care is principally a problem of poor and minority families.

Indeed while in Wayne County the majority of those in foster care are poor and black, problems leading to neglect and abuse cases know no race or class boundaries. According to facts on Family Preservation Services, of all children in foster care almost 55% are White, 22% Black and 10% Hispanic.

4. Most of the children who are in foster care are placed because of severe physical or sexual abuse at home.

In our pilot program we found that 66% of our cases were environmental neglect, 31% physical abuse, 38% neglect and 19% sexual abuse. Indeed more than half the cases in which children are removed involved neglect not abuse.

5. State caseworkers are usually mature, well trained professionals, but have little authority to protect children or are hampered by the system.

Contrary to our experience, state workers did not always have knowledge of this program. If they knew of it, they opted not to use it. The reason being partly because of high staff turnover, new and inexperienced workers yet in spite of the above, these workers had wide authority to remove children from their homes.

Problems Encountered

Change is always a difficult process especially when trying to change the traditional thinking about families by large established and bureaucratic departments such as the Department of Social Services, Juvenile Court and society at large. Thus most of the problems we encountered were with the above.

1. In 1988 the State of Michigan Department of Social Services embarked and embraced the Family Preservation Program whose main goal was to keep families together. This was a step of change in the right direction. The problem was convincing workers within the Department to the mission and goals of the Family Reunification Division.

2. The attitudes and beliefs of the workers who were new to Family Preservation, brought out resentful feelings toward change from the traditional ways of treating families to a treatment modality that preserve families as the most important foundation for treatment. Thus education by the Family Preservation Division became key to dispelling these attitudes. It was however, clear that the program was misunderstood and under utilized because the program operated under different assumptions and conditions than most public social service.

3. The passing of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 was for states to make "reasonable efforts" in order to prevent unnecessary out of home placement of children and to reunite children with their families. Enforcing this Act has been sporadic within the Juvenile Courts. Thus the education of the Juvenile Court personnel by the Family Preservation team in keeping families together became key. This however, did not mean that it would be honored.

4. Empowering and strengthening families who have become complaisant and powerless by family preservation practitioners, who themselves had to be trained in a different philosophy and modality to keep families together, had the task of convincing families and society at large that it was to their advantage to keep families together and cost effective for clients tax dollars to help and support families at home.

5. The scope and size of the Boysville Family Reunification did not warrant large scale recognition by the State Foster Care Workers. The workers indeed felt that the program was very limited given the huge numbers of children in the foster care system. That caused a problem in itself.

6. The Juvenile Court referees or judges did not always buy into the merits of the program. They chose not to approve extended visits or reunification services to take place for the purpose of reuniting children with their families.

What is important, is that this program was able to overcome the problems encountered and in return learned from these problems in order to make adjustment to the program. The program was replicated by the state because of its merits.

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Program Implementation

Program implementation was preceded by a joint venture training sponsored by Boysville and the Wayne County Department of Social Services, for 250 foster care workers as the referral source. Workers were trained on the utilization of the program for reunification services for families. Training was scheduled for May 15 and May 16, 1990, to introduce the Boysville Reunification Project and was vital for successful program implementation. This training also served as a vehicle for the State of Michigan to launch the Family Preservation Initiative for the State's reunification effort in Wayne County.

The Boysville Family Reunification Project, though small in scope, that is, two full time workers servicing four families at a time, had state-wide implications. Its success would be replicated by the State of Michigan as a cost effective program that would affect the reduction of the length of stay in foster care.

The first three referrals to this program were received on May 17, 1990 from Wayne County Department of Social Services - Foster Care. The program suffered from lack of referrals due to the perception of foster care workers about the scope and capacity of this program to handle large numbers of referrals.

Program Operations

Program Operations involved the day to day operations of the Family Reunification Program. Of importance in program operations were the Homebuilders model hallmarks:

Philosophy

- Children have a right to their family.
- The family is the focal point of child welfare services.
- Our first and greatest investment is to the care and treatment of children in their own homes.
- The family is the fundamental resource for the nurturing of children.
- Parents should be supported in their efforts to care for their children.
- It is in the best interest of the child for his or her family to remain intact in the absence of compelling evidence to the contrary.
- Families are diverse and have a right to be respected for the special cultural, racial, ethnic, and religious tradition that make families distinct.
- Children can be reared well in different kinds of families and one family form should not be discriminated against in favor of another.

Values and Beliefs

- Safety is our first concern
- Children need families
- We can't tell which families are hopeless
- Troubled families can change
- Clients are our colleagues
- We must respect our clients' values and beliefs
- It is our job to instill hope
- A crisis is an opportunity for change
- Inappropriate intervention can do harm

Program Characteristics

- Focus on family strengths - not problems
- Limited to children at risk of imminent placement
- Immediate response (within 24 hours)
- Highly flexible scheduling (24-hour, 7-day/week availability)
- Small caseloads (2 families) per worker
- Intensive intervention (5-20 hours/week as needed)
- Services delivered in clients home and community
- Time-limited and brief (4-6 weeks)
- "Hard and "Soft" services delivered by a single worker with a safety backup
- Ecological approach (works with family and community interaction)
- Goal-oriented, with "limited" objectives
- Flexible money
- Evaluation

Service Delivery

One of the hallmarks of the Homebuilders model adapted for reunification at Boysville was the rich variety of services that workers use to achieve program goals. Clinical, concrete and

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case management services are all include. Referrals are received from the Department of Social Services Foster Care Division at a first come first serve basis, no waiting lists. Once a case is received, a face to face contact is made within 24 hours, the case will then be serviced for 8 weeks, which is the duration of the program. Client evaluation is done at 3, 6 and 12 months of the program to determine if families are still intact.

During the course of the project 50 families were referred to the program. Forty (80%) completed the program. Of the 40 who completed the program 32 (80%) were reunited with their children at program completion.

Of the 32% (80%) families that reunited
25 - 78% (73%) families that reunited reached 3 months
21 - 66% (31%) families that reunited reached 6 months
12 - 36% (14%) families that reunited reached 12 months

Staffing and Training

Program staffing is the key in the program service delivery both in terms of quality and cost. All Family Reunification staff received four days of Homebuilders new worker training. Thereafter there were additional trainings for Supervisors and Program Managers. Trainings were provided by the Homebuilders training consultants as well as Family Preservation Specialists on an ongoing basis as well as for regular consultations, on-site visits and field family visits.

Qualifications for program staff was as follows:

Program Manager - Ph.D./MSW/MA and Homebuilders Training Program
Supervisor - MSW/MA/ and Homebuilders Training
Two Family Workers - BSW/BA and Homebuilders Training
Program Secretary - High School Diploma & Business Diploma

Of the original staff that began this program only one Family Worker left for graduate school. The staff retention has been very high. Intense supervision for worker support and flexible schedules had a lot to do with the high staff retention.

Besides the Homebuilders training workers received Boysville orientation, a three day in-service training: Michigan Department of Social Services - Office of Children and Youth Services regular trainings in substance abuse, sexual abuse, physical abuse and neglect, court procedures, juvenile sex offenders, etc., external workshops seminars and State and National conferences.

Boysville participated in the statewide Department of Social Services - Foster Care Training in January 1991 in preparation for replication using the Boysville Family Reunification Project as a model. The Program Manager presented the project in Washington D.C. at the Grantees Conference in April 1991. This project also has been presented in workshops in local conferences. (See Appendices A & B).

Program Goal Accomplishments

To adapt Homebuilders for reunification services.

The Homebuilders model was adapted for reunification for the Boysville Project in 1989, with the help of the Wayne County Department of Social Services and Wayne County Juvenile Court. The projected was funded by the Department of Health and Human Services and the Skillman Fund. The implementation of the design of the Family Reunification model took place in May 17, 1989 when the project received its first three referrals. Boysville by

having had a Homebuilders program - Families First did not anticipate having problems in implementing this program. The success of this program has been replicated by the State of Michigan to provide reunification services to families.

To disseminate on a local, regional and national level information regarding the project.

Boysville Family Reunification Project had availed itself locally, through working with the Wayne County Department of Social Services servicing DSS clients, participating in local, regional and national workshops, task forces and trainings disseminating information about this program. The result was the state wide implementation of this program for reunification services to clients in the state of Michigan as of January 1991. Boysville Family Reunification has disseminated information about this project to the Ohio Department of Human Services, Columbus Ohio, Catholic Children's Aid Society Toronto, Canada, Chippewa Health Center in Wisconsin, Marion County Department of Public Welfare, Indianapolis in Indiana and the Homebuilders in Washington State, for consultation (See Appendice C).

To provide technical assistance to replicate a like or similar model.

Boysville Family Reunification has accomplished this objective through the state replication of this program. Michigan Department of Social Services has used the technical assistance from this program in order to replicate this program state wide. Information has been shared through statistical information and assessing the success made in this program (See Appendice D).

To increase family functioning.

Family Reunification did not only increase family functioning but empowered many a family and the families responded with so much caring and concern for their children. Thanks to the Homebuilders philosophy which was key to successful work with families.

To decrease the length of stay in foster care and to prevent re-entry into substitute care.

Boysville Reunification statistics are very convincing toward decreasing the length of stay for those in foster care and they also prevent re-entry into substitute care. The fact that families are still reunited after twelve months is evidence enough.

To provide an alternative cost effective program for Foster Care in Wayne County.

Our average cost per family during this project was $294.36. The program was definitely cost effective while keeping families together and minimizing the psycho-social effects of separation within families, reunification services provided to the biological family were help to the whole family and were far cheaper than having one child in foster care.

Boysville Family Reunification Project has successfully accomplished all of its original goals, as stated in the proposal. Of significant importance is however, the replication of this program by the State of Michigan Department of Social Services Foster Care Division effective January 1991. The State Family Preservation goals are as follows:

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To provide reunification services to families using the successful proven Homebuilders Model in Families First Programs.

To decrease the length of stay in foster care and prevent re-entry into care.

To provide a cost-effective program to keep families together.

Program Evaluation

Major accomplishments were made on the development of an information system for the Reunification program. Originally, a design was completed that included: an assessment, methods of tracking interventions, client status at closing from the program, and follow-up for the program. In designing this system it was imperative that the assessment match the practitioner's framework for providing services to client families.

Two instruments were initially identified for these purposes. The Family Assessment Form, a comprehensive tool designed to describe client status around the environment, a psychosocial assessment, the caretaker and the interaction among children and caretakers was evaluated. Also, the Social Network Map, a tool for identifying the amount and types of informal and formal social support families are receiving. It was determined that the FAF was too comprehensive for a program of short duration and intensity such as the Family Reunification Program.

In order to develop some certainty about the utility of the Social Network Map it was decided that the instrument should be tested. Hence, a pilot test was conducted on the utility of the Social Network Map to the practitioners in the Reunification program. The pilot included: the development of a data collection tool, the use of the tool with families for the

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purposes of assessment and treatment planing; and aggregate analysis of the data from the pilot. The training package was presented at a national conference and a series of publication are being prepared from the results of the pilot.

The Social Network Map will be the foundation of our information system for assessing and providing services to families. The following pieces of the information system were designed: management reporting formats; tools for tracking interventions; and a client satisfaction measure. Additional efforts will be utilized to complete the computer software for the entire system and develop an instrument for following up with families after services have been completed.

Conclusion

The Boysville Family Reunification Program has been a success in that all its original goals were achieved. The greatest achievement of course was the program's replication by the State for foster care. This replication took place effective January 1991. The implementation of this grant project was a major challenge to the agency. Family Reunification and other home-based have changed Boysville, Wayne County Department of Social Services and Wayne County Juvenile Court systems to help keep families together and encourage reunification. We believe that this sample of 39 serviced families over the course of this project was of significant value to the agency but more so to the client families who benefited from it, and now all foster care children who have a 75% chance of reuniting with their biological parents.

Boysville is very proud at what was achieved through this grant. We hope that the Office of Human Developmental Services will accept this report and in our joint effort accomplished for Wayne County families in providing them with reunification services.